



National
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South Korea: Short-Term
Political Prospects

Summary

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[REDACTED] To restore a sense of normality and ease tensions, the acting government has lifted nearly all restrictions on public activity imposed after the slaying, promised to revise the authoritarian Yushin Constitution, and taken steps to release political prisoners.

An electoral college will vote in early December to choose an interim president. Acting President Choe Kyu-ha faces no serious challenger in the vote.

[REDACTED]

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Even while promising to open the political system to more broadly based participation, the government, and the martial law authorities in particular, have made clear their intent to deal firmly with any widespread protest activity. The Army will remain the country's most important political actor, even after martial law is lifted, and it would quickly sacrifice liberalization as well as individual liberties if it thought that national security was at stake.

Rewriting the constitution could take as long as two years, and popular expectations could demand change at a pace faster than the government deems prudent. In this sensitive transition period, there is a danger of serious tension developing if students and militant dissidents bring pressure to bear through the use of confrontational tactics and provoke a clampdown by authorities determined to maintain order.

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South Korea: Short-Term Political Prospects

The Return to Normalcy The maintenance of national security remains the top priority of the holdover Cabinet and Martial Law Command in charge in South Korea following the assassination of President Park Chung Hee on 26 October, but this acting government—confident about its handling of the immediate transition—is turning its attention increasingly to planning for the future. Its ability to do so has been aided by Washington's rapid reaffirmation of support for South Korea, Pyongyang's cautious response to the death of Park, and the calm way in which the public has acted in a period of crisis.

Even though martial law remains in effect, the Army officers responsible for maintaining order have lifted most of the restrictions imposed on 27 October. All of the nation's universities are now back in session, and curfew restrictions have returned to normal. The National Assembly reconvened on 15 November to take up the budget, the normal item of business at this time of year. The opposition New Democratic Party (NDP) is now in attendance, ending a political standoff that had begun in early October when all of its members submitted their resignations in protest of the government expelling Kim Yong-sam, the party president, from the assembly.

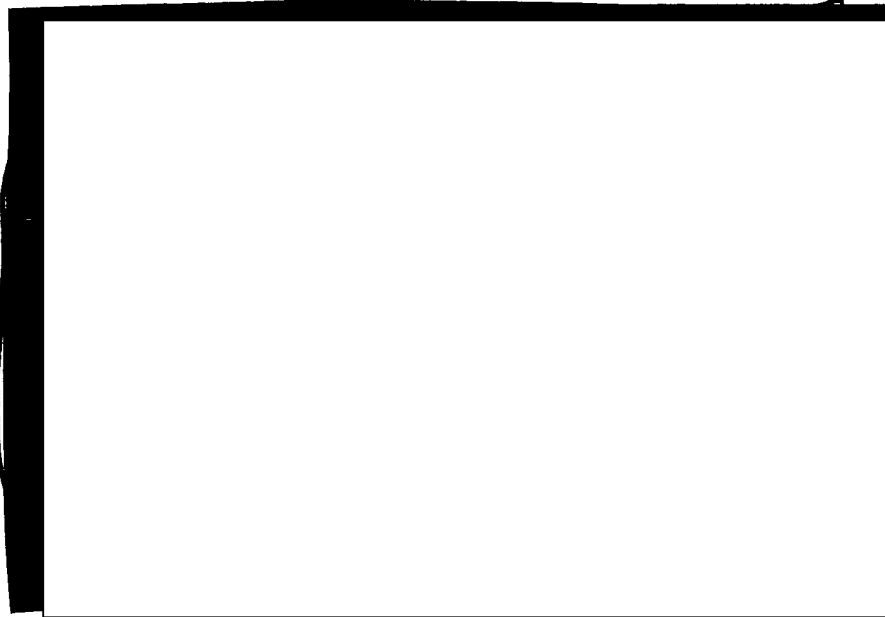
The acting government has also moved rapidly to forge a sense of political unity by outlining a plan for the orderly transfer of power to a successor government and acknowledging popular demands for political liberalization. On 10 November, acting President Choe Kyu-ha announced that:

- An electoral college vote by the National Conference for Unification (NUC) will choose a new president in accordance with current constitutional law.
- The successor will not complete Park's term, which extends to 1984, but will serve just long enough to oversee revision of the unpopular Yushin Constitution.
- The election of a permanent successor will come after an amended constitution provides new rules for choosing Korea's head-of-state. (u)

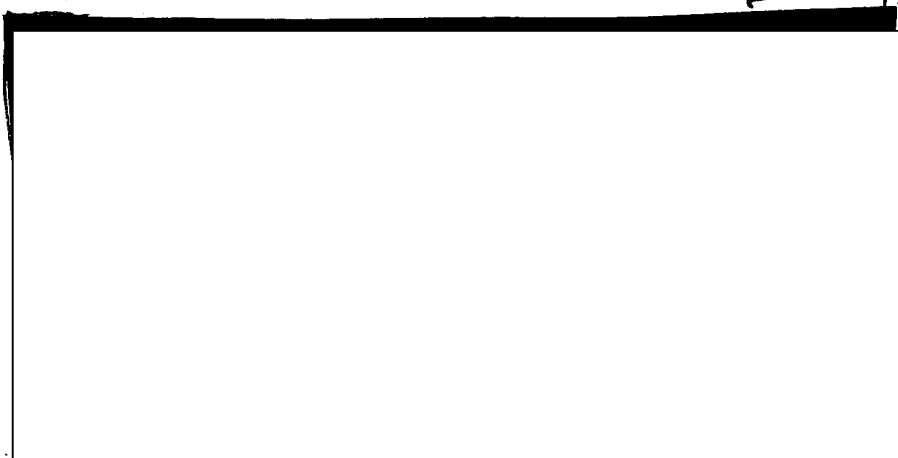
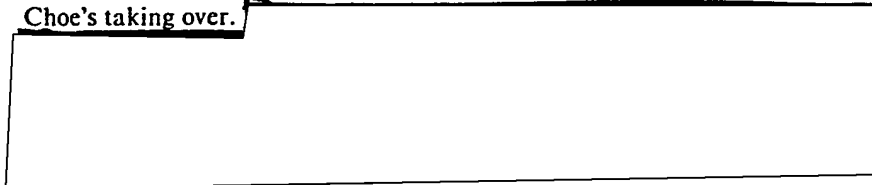
As long as he holds office as interim president, the caretaker successor will be operating under the Yushin Constitution and will have at his disposal the full range of powers that the constitution gave Park.

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Choe apparently will be the only serious contender in the vote that is scheduled for early December. He has the solid support of the holdover Cabinet and the Martial Law Command and so far is the only person to have been formally nominated by the NUC. Most Koreans accept the prospect of Choe's taking over.



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**Concessions on
Liberalization**

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Beyond committing itself to constitutional revision, the acting government has addressed popular demands for reform with symbolic acts of liberalization. It has already lifted the house arrest of former president Yun Po-sun—who for many years has been the administration's most strident critic—and probably will lift the house arrest of former NDP president Kim Tae-chung next month. Acting President Choe has ordered the Justice and Education Ministries to prepare for the early release of all political prisoners. The involvement of the Education Ministry in this review represents a special effort to build bridges to the academic community by reinstating students who by virtue of past political activism had lost their places in the university system.

[REDACTED]

These steps, however, have done little more than demonstrate a generalized commitment to liberalization. The acting government has not bound itself to a deadline for constitutional revision, catalogued what features of the constitution might be changed, or designated the National Assembly as the primary actor in enacting legal change. After the interim President is selected in December, these issues will likely become the focus of heated debate.

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Whether Korea scraps the Yushin Constitution of 1972 or only amends it, the greatest pressure for change will fall on two elements of the document which had come to symbolize the authoritarian nature of the Park government. These are the clauses providing for:

- Indirect election of the president by the NUC, an electoral college whose members are in effect appointed by the president, thereby premitting him to remain in office in perpetuity.
 - Presidential appointment of the *Yuchonghoe* (National Revitalization Party) which comprises one-third of the National Assembly membership.
- [REDACTED]

Reform without concessions on these points would be only a token nod to liberalization and as such unacceptable to political and social groups agitating for change. Few in the government will regret doing away with the *Yuchonghoe*. Although civilian and military officials will have more mixed sentiments on direct presidential elections, here too they probably will bow to public opinion.

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A Willingness To Compromise?

The acting government has made clear its intention to draw a wide spectrum of interest groups into the reform process, and it has already demonstrated unusual sensitivity in seeking out public opinion. Constitutional revision could take up to two years, however, and more than expressions of good intentions will be needed to prevent opposition and dissident leaders from pushing the government too hard and taking their case to the streets. [redacted]

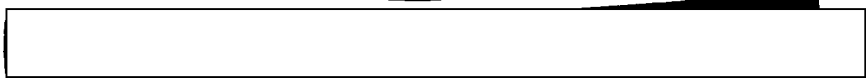
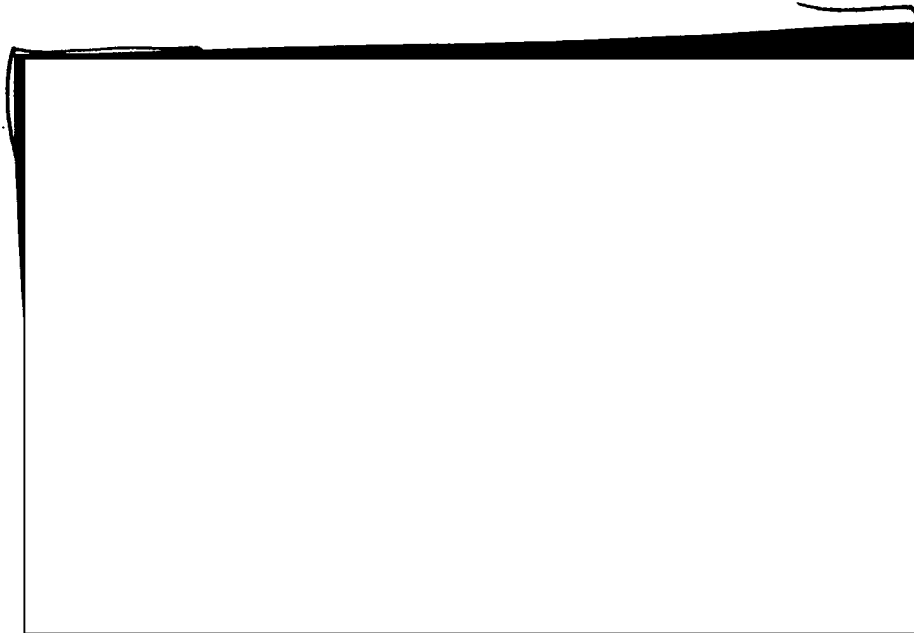
If the NDP believes the government commitment to liberalization to be more than superficial, it should be willing to cooperate as long as it retains a voice in the reform process. Among the party's demands [redacted] [redacted] re that the National Assembly be the major forum for debating constitutional revision and that the government consult with the NDP before making or announcing major political decisions. [redacted]

It is already apparent from its response to the planned succession by Choe next month that the NDP, in order to maintain its opposition party credentials, cannot be relied on at all critical stages to endorse government actions. [redacted]

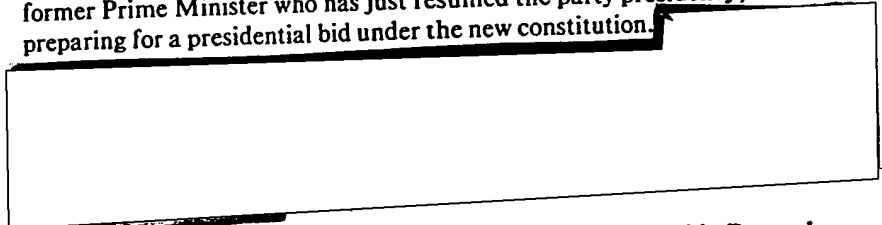
[redacted] prominent in the NDP, [redacted]

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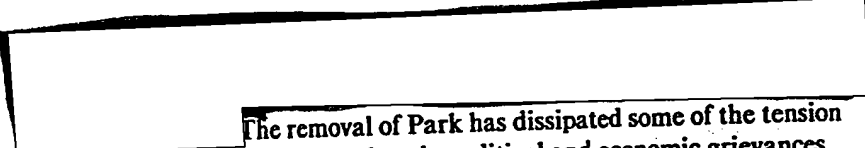


The progovernment DRP will bring pressures of a somewhat different nature to bear on the reform process. The party and Kim Chong-pil, the former Prime Minister who has just resumed the party presidency, are preparing for a presidential bid under the new constitution.



The new Cabinet that Choe will name once he is inaugurated in December should not differ demonstrably in attitude from the Cabinet inherited from Park.

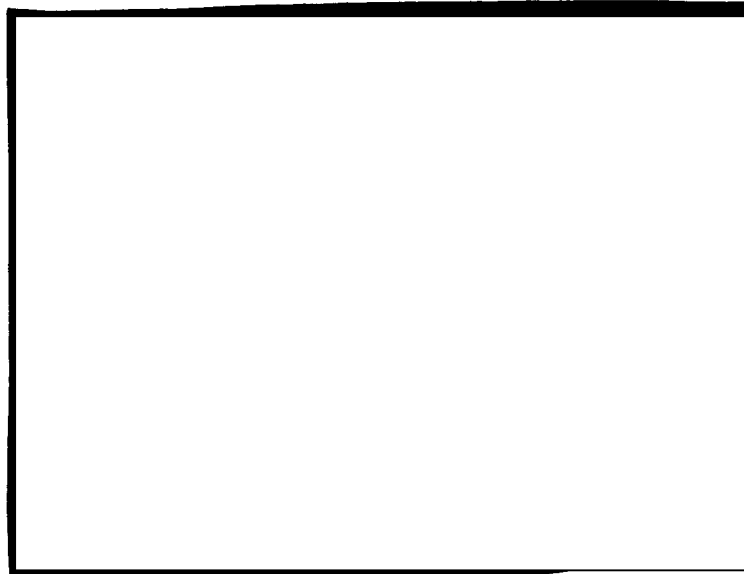
Even if martial law is lifted in the near future, the interim government will carefully solicit the views of the military before it makes major political decisions.



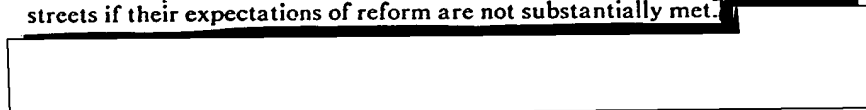
The removal of Park has dissipated some of the tension that had built in recent months, but the political and economic grievances that spurred the demonstrations in Pusan and Masan in October have not

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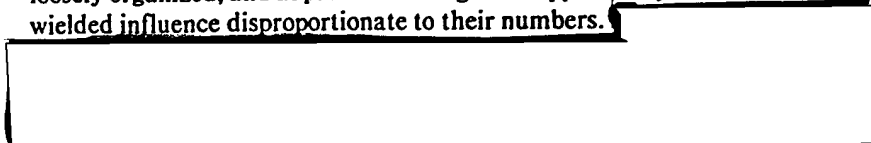
disappeared. No one in Korea doubts that the students will return to the streets if their expectations of reform are not substantially met.



On the other hand, neither the Cabinet headed by Choe nor the Martial Law Command under General Chong is prepared to allow liberalization to displace stability as the nation's top priority. There is little doubt that they would sacrifice reform on the altar of security if dissident activity threatened to disrupt domestic stability.


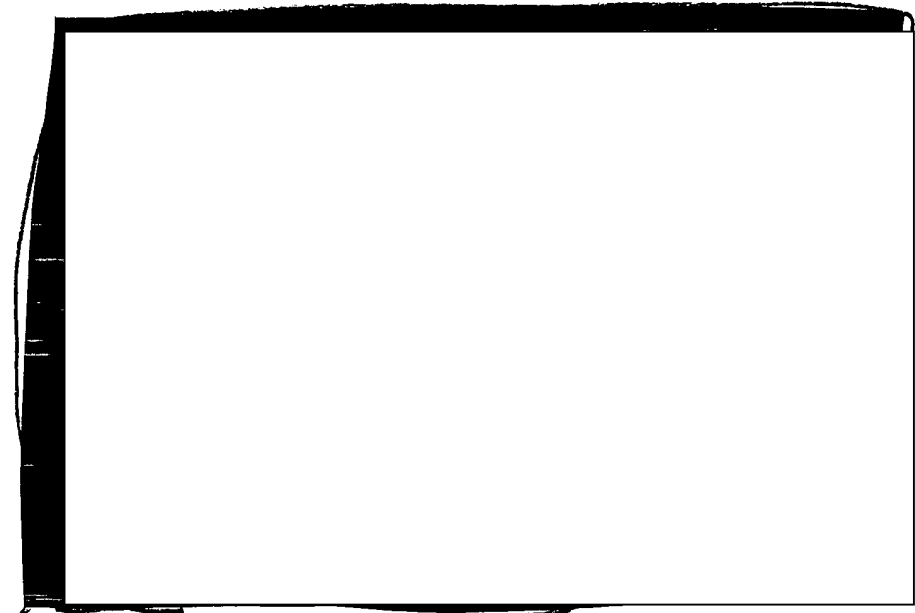
Potential Flash Points


One group that has not accepted the succession by Choe and the acting government's plan to operate under the Yushin Constitution during the interim transition is that of Korea's militant dissidents. Few in number, loosely organized, and at present lacking mass appeal, they have nonetheless wielded influence disproportionate to their numbers.





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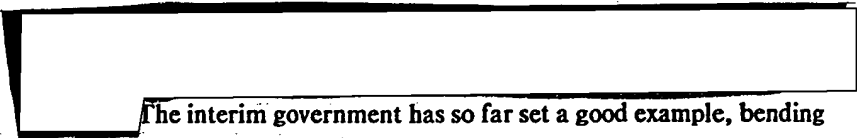
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From the government's perspective, the militant dissidents pose two particular problems. First, they are the group most likely to provide the ideological inspiration for any sizable antigovernment movement on the campuses. Second, they have not proved in the past to be amenable to manipulation by the government, and there are no current indications of their being willing to meet the government halfway. 



As the NDP candidate in 1971, Kim came close to defeating President Park in Korea's last direct presidential election, but out of parliamentary politics since 1972, he probably no longer has sufficient support to claim the party leadership. 



The interim government has so far set a good example, bending

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when necessary and reestablishing channels of communication with varied social and political interest groups. It has benefited in these early weeks from a popular desire to heal old wounds, but the honeymoon could end when Choe moves from being an acting president to an interim one. If at that point the government fails to set a timetable for reform and to work with the DRP and NDP in maintaining the momentum of change, the limited appeal that the militant dissidents now have could broaden into potentially destabilizing protest activity

The recent protest activity in Seoul and Kwangju indicates the willingness of the hardline dissidents to attack the government even before it has had a chance to prove its commitment to reform. In arresting some of the protestors involved, meanwhile, the Martial Law Command has displayed its determination to retain a veto over the types of political activity allowed.

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